Middle Clark Fork (119 River Miles)

Figure 21. Middle Clark Fork River Focus Area

The Middle Clark Fork River extends about 115 river miles from Milltown Dam in Bonner, Montana, to its confluence with the Flathead River, and is entirely free flowing. The Milltown Dam is scheduled to be removed in the near future. The river's drainage is mountainous and covered with the large forested tracts of the Lolo National Forest and private timberlands, broken by grazing and cropland areas in the lower valleys down to the Thompson Falls Dam. Through the broad Missoula Valley, the Middle Clark Fork is a sinuous river with frequent side channels, wide floodplains, and cottonwood-willow bottoms. The river then transitions into the Alberton Gorge whitewater area and becomes an entrenched single channel as it proceeds toward Thompson Falls. Major tributary systems such as Rattlesnake Creek and Fish Creek drain premier roadless wildlands including the Rattlesnake Wilderness and proposed Great Burn Wilderness along the Montana-Idaho divide. This river supports an excellent coldwater trout fishery including fluvial populations of native westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. Because the Middle Clark Fork receives the waters of the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and upper Clark Fork basins, it is known as a steady and productive system that supports a consistent fishery.

Associated Habitats

Habitat Type	Habitat Tier	Acres	Miles
Intermountain Valley Rivers	II		119
Intermountain Valley Streams	II		113
Lowland Lakes	III	546	
Lowland Reservoirs	III	9	

Mountain Lakes	III	1,168	
Mountain Streams	I		2,080

Associated Species of Greatest Conservation Need (Tier I Species)

There are a total of 20 aquatic species that are found within the Middle Clark Fork Focus Area. Tier I species are listed below. All associations can be found in Table 26.

Invertebrates: Western Pearlshell

Fish: Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout

Conservation Concerns & Strategies

Conservation Concerns	Conservation Strategies
Culverts, dams, irrigation diversions, and other instream barriers that fully or partially impede fish movement and reduce connectivity of habitat	Removal or modification of barriers in a manner that restores fish passage to ensure full migratory movement
Modification and degradation of stream channels caused by various construction or land management practices	Restoration of stream channels or streambanks to a condition that simulates their natural form and function
Riparian vegetation effected by range and forest management practices and streamside residential development (such activities destabilize streambanks, increase sediment inputs, reduced shading, and remove woody debris)	Support government and private conservation activities that encourage and support sustainable land management practices in riparian areas
	Modification of riparian management practices such that riparian vegetation is allowed to recover
	Develop statewide riparian best management principles
	Conservation easements and cooperative efforts to address human population growth and related impacts
Entrainment of juvenile and adult fishes by irrigation diversions or other water intakes	Screening or modification of irrigation diversions or other water intakes in a manner that prevents entrainment of fishes

Alterations of the quantity or timing of stream flows, causing dewatering or unnatural flow fluctuations that diminish the quantity or quality of essential habitats	Implementation of various water conservation or flow management practices that restore essential habitats and simulate the natural hydrograph
	To the extent feasible, operate dams to mimic a more natural hydrograph on the main channel of rivers and ensure a more natural thermal regime
Water chemistry problems that arise due to municipal discharge, irrigation return water, and other sources	Work with municipal government and private landowners to reduce point source pollutants
Unnatural hydrograph and water temperatures associated with the presence and operations of large dams	Work with appropriate authorities to restore hydrograph that mimics the natural regime
Non-native fish species	Support activities to promote natural habitats that support native species
Misidentification of fish species by anglers	Increase efforts to educate anglers on the identification of fish species
Riprap and other streambank stabilization work	Work with new stabilization projects to reduce impacts and support efforts to restore existing rip-rap areas to natural condition
	Develop statewide riparian best management principles
Whirling disease	Continue efforts to minimize impact of whirling disease on native fish populations
Degradation of habitat by unmanaged recreation use	Increase current efforts to improve river recreation management practices

References

The Nature Conservancy. 2004. Canadian Rocky Mountains Ecoregional Assessment. Four volumes including Report, Appendices, Conservation Area Descriptions, and Maps.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2004. Conservation Focus Areas of the Great Divide: a vast region encompassing the Upper Missouri, Yellowstone and upper Columbia watersheds. Publisher: USFWS, Benton Lake Wildlife Refuge, Great Falls, MT. 77 pp.